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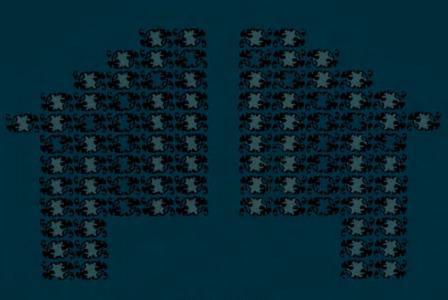
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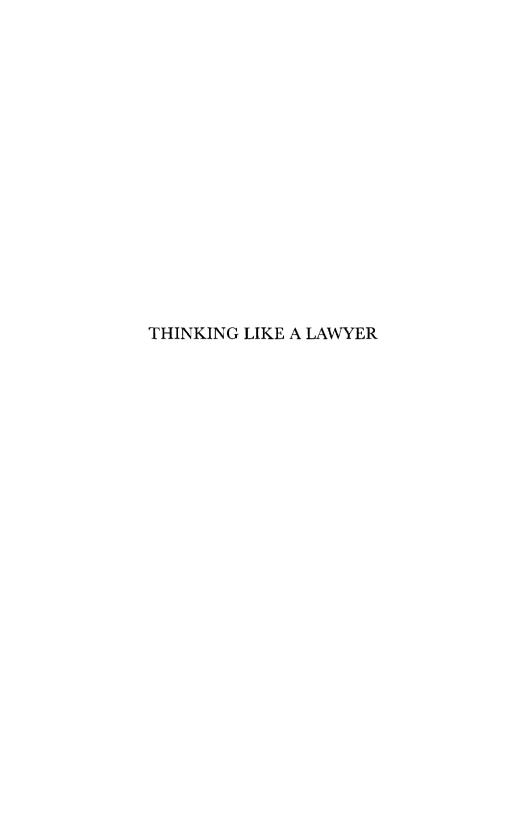
for John Crook

on his Eightieth Birthday

Edited by Paul McKechnie



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PAUL MCKECHNIE
THINKING LIKE A LAWYER



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# ESSAYS ON LEGAL HISTORY AND GENERAL HISTORY FOR JOHN CROOK ON HIS EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

EDITED BY

# PAUL MCKECHNIE



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# ROMAN LAW AND THE LAWS OF THE MEDES AND PERSIANS: DECIUS' AND VALERIAN'S PERSECUTIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

## Paul McKechnie

# 1. The Purpose of Decius' Edict

I.B. Rives has argued in 'The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire' that by issuing the order in AD 249 that all inhabitants of the Roman empire should sacrifice to the gods. Decius (whether he knew it or not)2 took a step on the long journey of transition from the ancient world to the middle ages. His edict was "in some ways the religious analogue to Caracalla's citizenship decree". Religions of the Roman world were fundamentally local, but those of medieval Europe were universalizing.<sup>4</sup> Although local officials supervised the sacrifices Decius ordered, and those sacrifices might be made to gods worshipped in civic cults,<sup>5</sup> Rives holds that the edict "created a religious obligation between the individual and the empire", with the city functioning merely as the imperial administration's 'religious agent'. This, he argues, weakened the tradition of collective local cults, at the same time as strengthening the definitional boundaries of a religion of the Roman empire. As a result, the idea of Roman religion could be put forward more forcefully a few years later by Valerian, who decreed "that those who do not practise Roman religion ought to acknowledge Roman rites".6 It was one of the ironies

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm I}$  J.B. Rives 'The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire'  $\it JRS$  89 (1999), 135–54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 154 (and cf. 151, among other places).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 153. <sup>4</sup> Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> As Rives observes at 152 and n. 90, referring to sacrifices being directed to the Capitoline Triad at Carthage (Cyprian *De lapsis* 24 and *Epistles* 59.13.3), and the Nemeseis at Smyrna (*Martyrdom of Pionius* 6.3 and 7.2). *Libelli* (sacrifice-certificates) as preserved in Egypt follow a set wording, which does not specify to what deity or deities the sacrifices were made (John R. Knipfing 'The Libelli of the Decian Persecution' *Harvard Theological Review* 16 [1923], 345–90: at 346–7. Knipfing gives a version incorporating [in English] all attested elements of the standard wording).

<sup>6</sup> Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 153; wording of decree from *Acta Cryptiani* 1.

of history, Rives concludes, that Christianity—whose adherents suffered under Decius' edict—was later itself to become 'Roman religion'. the defining religion of the Roman empire; but the reason why events took this turn may (he suggests) have been that the cult act of sacrifice—which Decius' edict enjoined—proved in the long term not to be a sufficiently strong element around which to build a unified religion.7

Some important questions are not addressed in Rives' presentation of his case. What about the Jews? Rives records what little there is to know—probably they were not required to sacrifice.8 But why not? Rives contends that the primary purpose of Decius' edict was not to wipe Christianity out; and he favours emphasizing the edict's "positive goal of ensuring that everyone in the Empire, Christians included, perform a full and traditional sacrifice." Well, everyone but (apparently) Jews excluded. And yet they were an important minority. How did an exemption for Jews come to seem consistent with the overriding goal of the edict, if that goal was what Rives takes it to be?

And what about the issue of definition? Is it true that, as late as 249, empire-wide persecution of religious transgressors could not be undertaken until boundaries of the religion of empire had been set, in the form of the wording of new legislation?<sup>10</sup> That Christianity was illegal was not in doubt—in fact, early in the third century. Ulpian had collected the imperial rescripts laving down penalties for Christianity in his De officio proconsulis. 11 And well before Decius' time Christianity could be contrasted against Roman religion—as, for instance, in the Martyrdom of the Scillitans. Speratus, replying to the proconsul Saturninus' suggestion that he and his companions should "return to a right mind", outlines Christian moral values, prompting the proconsul to say:

<sup>7</sup> Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 154.
8 Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 138 n. 16.
9 Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 142.
10 Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 153.
11 Lactantius Divine Institutes 5.11.19 (cf. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix 'Why were the early Christians persecuted?' in M.I. Finley Studies in Ancient Society [London, 1974], 210-49 at 223-4; this article first published at Past and Present 26 [1963], 6-38). On Roman law as it affected Christians and Jews see also John Crook Law and Life of Rome (London and Ithaca, NY, 1967), 278-80.

We also are religious people, and our religion is simple: we swear by the genius of our lord the emperor, and pray for his safety, as you also ought to do.

Later, passing sentence, the proconsul reads from a tablet:

Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the rest have confessed that they live in accordance with the religious rites of the Christians, and, when an opportunity was given them of returning to the usage of the Romans, persevered in their obstinacy, it is our pleasure that they should suffer by the sword.

To the proconsul at Carthage in 180, then, *Roman* religion was not too fuzzy a concept to be applied in court. It was clear to him that the defendants were already (and in each individual case) under an obligation to the empire to "return to the usage of the Romans". <sup>12</sup>

What, also, about the *Constitutio Antoniniana*? Rives argues that Decius' edict was its 'religious analogue'—but did it need one? The extant fragment of it frames the emperor's decision in religious terms:<sup>13</sup>

... I consider that in this way I can ... render proper service to their [the immortal gods'] majesty... by bringing with me to the worship of the gods all who enter into the number of my people. Accordingly, I grant Roman citizenship to all aliens throughout the world...

A high-minded sentiment. Dio Cassius says Caracalla's real aim was to increase the tax take.<sup>14</sup> But even if so, the *Constitutio Antoniniana* recorded in writing the government's aspiration towards universalizing religion. The statute assumes that (only) being a Roman makes it possible to practise Roman religion, and so makes all free people into citizens. This legislated change accords conceptual priority to 'imperial' religion over 'local' religion: does it not indicate that central government had begun to subvert locally-based cults a generation before Decius?

Partial answers, at any rate, to these questions emerge from considering the nature of Roman legislation and legal precedent. An imperial edict might reiterate a long-standing principle and innovate (if at all) only by reminding officials to act against offenders: so

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The martyr-act does not record the martyrs' statuses, but the proconsul sentences them to death by beheading; this method of execution may indicate that they were Roman citizens.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> P. Giessen 40 col. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> D.C. 77.9; cf. Fergus Millar A Study of Cassius Dio (Oxford, 1964), 152-3.

Decius, by legislating, was not necessarily stating a new religious principle. As for the Jews, precedent excusing them from polytheistic observance was substantial, and dated back hundreds of years. It had survived the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and two further Jewish wars; the ban against circumcision brought in by Hadrian had been rescinded under Antoninus Pius. <sup>15</sup> The *Constitutio Antoniniana*, for all its (professed) religious motivation, did not (it seems) legislate to change the religious conditions applying to Jews: indeed, Jews who were not already citizens received citizenship under it like everyone else. Similarly, Decius' edict did not seek to depart from precedent where the Jews were concerned.

So, as far as the statutory regulation of religion was concerned, Decius' edict was not innovative in quite the way Rives posits. It did not draw out hitherto unmentioned religious consequences of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* (since that law foregrounded religion anyway), it did not define a hitherto unexplained concept of 'Roman religion' (since 'Roman religion' was already understood), and it left intact the principal legally-established exception to the presumption that all Romans practised Roman religion.

All this indicates that the case Rives puts forward in his article cannot be accepted without important reservations. All the same, his basic proposal that the edict should be viewed from the perspective of traditional religion<sup>16</sup> is persuasive. He is not the first to suggest that instituting empire-wide persecution of Christians cannot have been the chief purpose of the legislation.<sup>17</sup> David S. Potter goes further and suggests that Decius may not even have been aware of Christianity as a problem; but he has probably underestimated Decius' general knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Christians were numerous enough for any emperor, even one who was (in Potter's phrase) 'quite stupid',<sup>19</sup> to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> SHA Hadrian 14.2 and Digest 48.8.11; cf. Amnon Linder (ed.) The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation (Detroit and Jerusalem, 1987), 99–102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Rives 'Decree of Decius' (as in n. 1), 135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> For a summary of views on whether Decius aimed to exterminate Christianity see Hans A. Pohlsander 'The Religious Policy of Decius' in *ANRW* II.16.3 (Berlin, 1986), 1826–42 at 1839–40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> David S. Potter *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: a Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford, 1990), 43. Rives, more plausibly, says ('Decree of Decius' [as in n. 1], 141) that "an emperor who required universal sacrifice in the mid-third century AD could hardly be oblivious of its implications for Christians."

<sup>19</sup> Potter Prophecy and History (as in n. 18), 41.

be aware that they existed and dissented from polytheism. And after his edict was passed. Decius took a personal part in enforcing it— G.W. Clarke seems to be right to argue that the emperor himself was the judge in the trial of Celerinus in Rome.<sup>20</sup> To Christians, of course, persecution looked like the main point. So Eusebius, little more than half a century later, read events in the context of the (mistaken) idea that Philip the Arab had been a Christian.<sup>21</sup> "Decius... on account of his enmity towards Philip, raised a persecution against the churches..."

The way the sacrificing-campaign worked indicates that it was primarily meant to capture divine blessings believed to be obtainable by practising Roman religion, and only secondarily to detect recalcitrant persons who ought to be punished. At Alexandria, the sacrifices took place in a public gathering, with individuals called forward by name to go through the necessary ceremony, and a large crowd in attendance;<sup>22</sup> Clarke is surely right to argue that the names did not come from census-rolls, in an attempt to summon all inhabitants individually, but were given in on the day to an official who then made a list, to save queuing.<sup>23</sup> Clarke also observes that one was not required to sacrifice in one's place of census registration—another compromise on the attempt to enforce universal coverage. Preserved libelli do not appear to have been issued to people whom it would have been easy to suspect of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> The inference must be that the sacrificingcampaign did not amount to a systematic inquiry into allegiance. Admittedly, bishops of the empire's main cities were attacked soon after the edict arrived (Fabian, bishop of Rome, being put to death on 20 January 250,25 and Babylas, bishop of Antioch, four days later:<sup>26</sup> at Alexandria, the Prefect sent a soldier after Bishop Dionysius,<sup>27</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Cyprian Epistles 39.2.1 and G.W. Clarke 'Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius' Antichthon 3 (1969), 63-77 at 64.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 6.39.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.41.11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Clarke 'Some Observations' (as in n. 20), 71.
<sup>24</sup> Rives ('Decree of Decius' [as in n. 1], 141) is rightly unenthusiastic about suggestions that Aurelia Ammonous, daughter of Mystus, priestess of Petesouchos, the great, the mighty, the immortal, and priestess of the gods in the Moeris quarter (whose libellus is Knipfing no. 3, at Knipfing 'Libelli of the Decian Persecution' pp. 364-5), was a secret or former Christian, or had Christian relatives.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39.4,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.40.2.

and at Carthage Bishop Cyprian was declared an outlaw),<sup>28</sup> but this was only to be expected. Provincial officials knew that arresting bishops, or making them leave town, would help ensure compliance from their flocks.

So what benefit, not ordinarily obtained, did Decius hope to gain from the gods, or what particular motive impelled him to call for a campaign of sacrifice by everyone across the Roman empire? The guess sometimes hazarded that the whole thing was a (delayed) way of marking the millennium of Rome is not persuasive:<sup>29</sup> Rome's millennium was past and gone, and sufficiently celebrated, before Decius came to the throne. So if religious reinforcement of the principles behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* was also not at issue, then what was? In this chapter I will draw attention to a possible political motive for Decius' edict, suggesting that on this occasion, and again under Valerian, strategic concerns provoked the demand by central government for a demonstration (directed to the gods) of religious unity.

# 2. Persian Aggression and Roman Weakness

Since Ardashir in 226 succeeded in taking over from the Parthian Arsacids, the Roman empire had had a new and militarily aggressive state as its eastern neighbour. Ardashir himself, Dio Cassius and Herodian say, claimed that the domains of the ancient Persian kings, as far as the sea separating Asia from Europe, were rightfully part of his realm.<sup>30</sup> In 232 Severus Alexander led a not very successful

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Cyprian Letters 66.4.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Potter's explanation centres on this: "Decius... may have intended this act to reaffirm the *pax deorum*, and to reassure people throughout the empire that the empire was still secure after the passing of the millennium" (*Prophecy and History* [as in n. 181, 43).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> D.C. 80.4.1, saying that "he [Ardashir] accordingly became a source of fear to us"; Herodian 6.2.1–2. A.D. Lee (Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity [Cambridge, 1993], 21–2) does not think Ardashir would have known enough about the Achaemenid empire to speak in the terms Herodian records: he might be right if Persian tradition was Ardashir's only source of information. But Ardashir was probably not as isolated as that: it is likely that he had visitors from the Roman empire as informants. Plotinus, after all, went east with Gordian III's expedition, hoping to make contact with learned Persians and Indians (and he had difficulty getting back to Antioch after Gordian died: Porphyry Life of Plotinus 3). Others may have had more success, and been able to tell Ardashir about Darius and Xerxes.

Roman campaign against Ardashir,<sup>31</sup> but later in the 230s Carrhae and Nisibis were taken by the Persians, and held until recaptured under Gordian III in 242.<sup>32</sup> Potter suggests that a revolt in Africa, and perhaps a barbarian invasion across the Danube, may be reasons why the Romans did not move faster than they did to regain control of this Roman territory from Persia.<sup>33</sup> Unsettled conditions and weaker Roman control were also reflected in the brief restoration of the kingdom of Osrhoene under Abgar IX from 240–2: for most of the third century this territory was part of the province of Mesopotamia and Osrhoene, governed by an equestrian prefect.<sup>34</sup>

Between January and March 244, Gordian III died campaigning against Ardashir's successor Shapur I. A mound a few miles east of the Euphrates commemorated him.<sup>35</sup> Philip, who took over as emperor, got out of Gordian's Persian war, making a treaty on unfavourable terms. Potter concludes that the Romans paid 500,000 aurei to Shapur at once (with annual payments to follow), acquiesced in Shapur keeping Roman territory he had captured, and agreed not to help the king of Armenia against Persia.<sup>36</sup> After the 244 treaty, the eastern end of the Roman empire came under the command of Philip's brother, the Praetorian Prefect Julius Priscus, addressed as 'Prefect of Mesopotamia with consular standing' in a papyrus petition dated 28 August 245.<sup>37</sup> When he dealt with this petition, Julius Priscus was

<sup>31</sup> Herodian 6.5.1-6.6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Zonaras 12.18; George Syncellus p. 681 (= 443); cf. Potter *Prophecy and History* (as in n. 18), 190-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Potter Prophecy and History (as in n. 18), 191-2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> J. Teixidor 'Les derniers rois d'Edesse d'après deux nouveaux documents syriaques' Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 76 (1989), 219–22, and Potter Prophecy and History (as in n. 18), 214.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus 23.5.7, Eutropius *Breviarium* 9.2.3, Zosimus 3.14.2: Potter discusses the exact location of the mound at *Prophecy and History* [as in n. 18], 202–4: at 211 he attributes Gordian's death to a mutiny in his army, provoked by "a mismanaged attempt to invade Persia at the wrong time of year".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Potter Prophecy and History (as in n. 18), 224–5: D. Oates (Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq [Oxford, 1968], 82–9) noted the permanent destruction of a Roman fort at Ain Sinu, and suggested that the Romans abandoned the region between Singara and the Tigris after the 244 peace; and in the excavations of a fort at Kifrin on the lower Euphrates, the latest coins found were of Gordian III (E. Valtz Kīfrin, La Fortezza del Limes [Turin, 1985], 112 and 120, and E. Valtz 'Kifrin, a fortress of the limes on the Euphrates' Mesopotamia 22 [1987], 81–9 at 88–9).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou 'Documents d'archives romains inédits du moyen Euphrate (III° siècle après J.-C.)' Comptes rendus de l'académie des inscriptions 1989, 535–61, at 545–8.

conducting business at the Baths of Hadrian in Antioch—which may hint that it was difficult for him to take up residence in his province. Later, he had a grander title; he is described on a dedication from the later 240s as 'Rector of the Orient'. 38 Julius Priscus may have won back some territory for his brother (Zonaras says Philip soon broke his treaty with Persia, but in the Thirteenth Sibvlline Oracle it looks as if the Persians were the aggressors—a version which may be more consistent with Julius Priscus trying in 245 to run the province of Mesopotamia from Antioch).39 In an unpublished petition on papyrus, described by Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou (and from the same group of papyri as the one addressed to Julius Priscus), Rostamos from Birtha Okbanon in Mesopotamia asks officials to rule that Barsemaias must give up possession of a vineyard which Rostamos inherited from his father, but left six years ago to escape a Persian invasion.40 This undated text may be connected with the frontier moving back in the Romans' favour in the mid-240s: the reason for the six-year interval may be that the vineyard had been in Persianheld territory from the time of the invasion to the time when the petition was filed.

But even if some vineyards were changing hands thanks to Julius Priscus' activities, there was no large-scale campaign in the 240s after Gordian III to reassert control of Roman territory up to its former eastern boundaries. So, by the time Decius was proclaimed emperor, in Pannonia,<sup>41</sup> there were areas inside the eastern frontier of his empire which had been under Persian occupation for almost a decade. Persian aggressive moves were more than 'razzias' (as Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu call them):<sup>42</sup> Sassanid rulers wanted

<sup>38</sup> ILS 9005, from Philippopolis (Schuhba) in Arabia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Zonaras 12.19 says that "after a while, [Philip] put the agreement aside and got hold of the lands"; but Sibylline Oracles 13.27–31 says that "... there will briefly be an end to war, but not for long: when the wolf shall swear oaths to the dogs of gleaming teeth against the flock he will ravage, harming the wool-fleeced sheep, and he will break the oaths and then there will be lawless strife of arrogant kings ..." It seems to be right to identify the dogs with the Romans and the wolf with Shapur (cf. Potter Prophecy and History [as in n. 18], 228).

<sup>40</sup> Feissel and Gascou 'Documents d'archives romains' (as in n. 37), no. 2, pp. 557–8.

Heissel and Gascou 'Documents d'archives romains' (as in n. 37), no. 2, pp. 557-8. To Zosimus 1.21.2; cf. A.R. Birley 'Decius Reconsidered' in Edward Frézouls and Hélène Jouffroy (eds.) Les empereurs illyriens: Actes du colloque de Strasbourg (11-13 octobre 1990) organisé par le Centre de recherche sur l'Europe central et sud-orientale (Strasbourg, AECR [Université des sciences humaines de Strasbourg. Contributions et travaux de l'institut d'histoire romaine, 8], 1998), 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N.C. Lieu *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363* (London, 1991), 2.

to get and retain land for their empire, even if they did not really expect to carry out Ardashir's threat of taking all Asia as far as the Propontis from the Romans.

## 3. Persecution of non-Zoroastrians

At the court of Shapur I (242–272) there was a Zoroastrian clergy-man called Kartir, and the king made his position "independent and authoritative over religious matters at court and in every province and place, and over the priesthood throughout the empire". Kartir lived on into the reign of Vahram II (276–93), when his career-inscription at Naqsh-i-Rustam was composed and engraved. The inscription describes a Sassanid religious policy which (I will argue below) remained consistent under Ardashir and Shapur. I propose that Kartir's account of his activities amounts to a fair picture of what the Persians were doing in their realm in the 240s.

At the beginning of the text, Kartir records what he did with the broad-ranging powers the king gave him:<sup>44</sup>

... at the command of Shapur, King of kings, and with the support of the yazads and the King of kings, religious services were multiplied in every province and place, and many Vahram Fires were founded. And many a priest became joyful and prosperous. And charters were sealed for many fires and priestly colleges, and much benefit reached Ohrmazd and the yazads, and there was much confusion for Ahriman and the devs...

Then he lists promotions and honours he received from Shapur's successors on the throne. Afterwards, he records the religious results of his policies:<sup>45</sup>

...in every province and place of the whole empire the service of Ohrmazd and the yazads was exalted, and the Mazda-worshipping religion and its priests received much honour in the land. And the yazads, and fire and water and cattle, were greatly contented, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Inscription of Kartir on the Ka'aba of Zoroaster at Naqsh-i-Rustam (= KKZ), line 1: in M.L. Chaumont 'L'inscription de Kartir à la "Ka'bah de Zoroastre" (texte, traduction, commentaire)' Journal Asiatique 248 (1960), 339–80. Translation quoted from Mary Boyce (ed.) Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism (Manchester, 1984), 112.

<sup>44</sup> KKZ line 2.

<sup>45</sup> KKZ lines 6-10.

Ahriman and the devs suffered great blows and harm. And the creed of Ahriman and the devs was driven out of the land and deprived of credence. And Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians and Baptisers and Manichaeans were assailed in the land. And images were overthrown, and the dens of demons were (thus) destroyed, and the places and abodes of the vazads fi.e. fire temples were established . . . And from the first I. Kartir, underwent much toil and trouble for the yazads and the rulers, and for my own soul's sake. And I caused many fires and priestly colleges to flourish in Iran, and also in non-Iranian lands. There were fires and priests in the non-Iranian lands which were reached by the armies of the King of kings. The provincial capital Antioch and the province of Syria, and the districts dependent on Syria: the provincial capital Tarsus and the province of Cilicia, and the districts dependent on Cilicia; the provincial capital Caesarea and the province of Cappadocia, and the districts dependent on Cappadocia, up to Pontus, and the province of Armenia, and Georgia and Albania and Balasagan, up to the 'Gate of the Alans'-these were plundered and burnt and laid waste by Shapur, King of kings, with his armies. There too, at the command of the King of kings, I reduced to order the priests and fires which were in those lands. And I did not allow harm to be done them, or captives made. And whoever had thus been made captive, him indeed I took and sent back to his own land. And I made the Mazda-worshipping religion and its good priests esteemed and honoured in the land. And heretics and harmful men, who being in the priesthood did not in their expositions further the Mazda-worshipping religion and the service of the yazads, them I punished and rebuked until through me they were amended. And I drew up many documents and charters for fires and priestly colleges. And with the support of the yazads and the King of kings, and by my act, many Vahram Fires were founded in the land of Iran, and many next-of-kin marriages were made, and many people who had not believed, became believers. And there were many who had held the religion of the devs, and by my act they abandoned the religion of the devs and accepted the religion of the vazads.

Summarizing a long career, Kartir groups related events rather than proceeding chronologically: he claims credit early in the inscription, for instance, for assailing Manichaeans—but Shapur I was not unsympathetic to Mani and his followers (Mani wrote the *Shapuragan* for him): it was Vahram I who had Mani tortured to death in prison, in 276. When Kartir writes of captured Roman territory, he lists one after another the furthest places Persian armies captured in their campaigns against the Roman empire. Many of the places mentioned were not held long: Antioch, for example, was captured by the

Persians in 252, but taken back by the Romans. As far as Zoro-astrianism is concerned, Kartir makes a point of saying that he has supported establishment of sacred fires and priestly colleges both inside and outside Iran—and before listing the king's Roman conquests, he adds specifically that "There were fires and priests in the non-Iranian lands which were reached by the armies of the King of kings". These cult centres he has reorganized to reflect what he sees as the best up-to-date Zoroastrian practice: "There too, at the command of the King of kings, I reduced to order the priests and fires which were in those lands".

J. Duchesne-Guillemin, discussing Zoroastrian religion under the Sasanians, understands Kartir's career as one in which real political power came late: "Only under Shapur's successors," he writes, 46 "began Karder's promotion, which gave rise to the Mazdean hierarchy". Hormizd I, who came to the throne in 272, made Kartir, formerly an ehrpat ('master of knowledge', transliterated as herbad in Boyce's Textual Sources), into magupat ('Chief of magi': transliterated by Boyce as mobad). Duchesne-Guillemin goes on to discuss the influence Kartir may have had on the royal succession in the 270s, supporting as candidates for the throne first Vahram I (in 274) and then Vahram II (276-93), against their brother Narseh. But his interpretation, which minimizes Kartir's importance during Shapur's reign, is unsatisfactory. His late-career 'promotions' were a matter of giving new titles to a man who was already at the top. Kartir is mentioned by name in Shapur's inscription on the Ka'aba of Zarathustra at Nagsh-i-Rustam as receiving the same grant of animals and foods to be sacrificed on his behalf as other dignitaries who were not members of the royal family.<sup>47</sup> Kartir's nearby explanation of his own life's achievements fits this monumental context perfectly, and it is most natural to read it as implying that Kartir was an official of equal dignity with the others mentioned by Shapur: Hormizd the Chief Scribe, Naduk the Warden of the State Prison, Papak the Master of the Gate, and Mihrekhwast the Treasurer.

Furthermore, the hypothesis that Kartir was in post as 'Minister of Religion' from the 240s and throughout the years of Shapur's

J. Duchesne-Guillemin 'Zoroastrian Religion', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.) Cambridge History of Iran 3.2 (Cambridge, 1983), 866–908, at 880.
 See Boyce Textual Sources (as in n. 42), 111.

military conquests is attractive, on grounds of continuity of policy, because of the reforming religious outlook evident earlier in the *Letter of Tansar*. 48 In this letter Tansar, *herbad* in the time of Ardashir and in effect a predecessor of Kartir, 49 says that "Church and State were born of the one womb, joined together and never to be sundered". He goes on to explain to King Gushnasp the religious policies of Ardashir: imprisoning a religious dissident for a year (instead of putting him to death at once), and having "learned men... summon him at frequent intervals and advise him and lay arguments before him and destroy his doubts"; and closing dynastic fire temples set up by rival kings ("pure innovation, introduced by them without the authority of kings of old"). Ardashir and his minister Tansar acted against religious dissidents before Shapur ascended the throne. Kartir, therefore, probably came in to *continue* a policy of discouraging dissent against the official version of Zoroastrianism.

There was, then, an energetic decades-long campaign of pro-Zoroastrian reform in lands the Persians took over—and since the Persians took over and held territory inside the Roman empire, it must be assumed that areas formerly (and later) held by the Romans were subject to this campaign. Discouragement of non-Zoroastrian religions went along with Kartir's reform. When he says that "Ahriman and the devs suffered great blows and harm . . . the creed of Ahriman and the devs was driven out of the land and deprived of credence". he may be referring partly to non-Zoroastrian Persian religion, but that is not likely to be the only kind of religious deviance meant by "the creed of Ahriman and the devs". Greco-Roman deities, to a Zoroastrian, were 'devs', and their temples, where statues of them were kept, were 'dens of demons'. When Kartir says that "images were overthrown, and the dens of demons were (thus) destroyed", he probably means (among other things) that in his time, Greco-Roman temples and sanctuaries in Persian-occupied Roman territory were attacked. In fact, since 'the creed of Ahriman and the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> See Boyce Textual Sources (as in n. 42), 109–11. This letter is known from Ibn Isfandiyar's thirteenth-century History of Tabaristan. Boyce argues that the core of the letter as given by Ibn Isfandiyar is genuine, though she believes that it was revised in the sixth century, and that the Vorlage of Ibn Isfandiyar's Persian text was an Arabic version made in the ninth century.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin ('Zoroastrian Religion' [as in n. 46], 877) comments on the simplicity of Tansar's title (ehrpat/herbad) and takes it as confirmation that at his date in Zoroastrianism "the idea of an ecclesiastical hierarchy was still to be born".

devs' is mentioned before (and separately from) the other religions opposed by Kartir (of Jews, Buddhists, Brahmans, and Aramaic- and Greek-speaking Christians), it is likely that Kartir saw polytheists (including Greco-Roman polytheists) as the most important and largest group among the enemies of Zoroastrianism.

## 4. RELIGION AND THE DEFENCE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

As it happens, the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, which distils the history of the Roman East in these years, refers in passing to 'desecrations of temples' (iεροσυλίαι) as one of the features of its 'uprising of the evil Persians'.<sup>50</sup> Since many other undesirable but ordinary events are listed in the same place (wars, battles, murders, famines, plagues, lightning, plundering) it would not be wise to insist that 'desecrations of temples' must be a reminiscence of Kartir's activities. But it may be: there is no reason to presume that ex-Roman territory was exempt from the actions Kartir says he took in 'non-Iranian lands' in general.

So, in the 240s, the Persians were doing their best to impose their reformed religion on Romans in the territories they were occupying. They were destroying temples, and discouraging Greco-Roman-style worship of local deities. Decius, with the normal Roman methods of intelligence-gathering at his disposal,<sup>51</sup> must have heard what was happening. Knowing that Roman religion was being persecuted would have give him in 249/50 a stronger motive than any so far suggested for his edict on sacrifice and the consequent persecution of Christians. The edict itself probably did not expound the emperor's political reasons for issuing it (such a reference might have required embarrassing admissions of defeats and loss of territory). Its overriding purpose was to co-ordinate an act of worship of Roman gods on the largest scale possible, by requiring every individual to make a sacrifice. Decius exempted Jews from sacrificing,<sup>52</sup> on the basis of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle 12-13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> A.D. Lee observes (*Information and Frontiers* [as in n. 30], 147) that the level of information available to Roman government about the Persians was high, by comparison with what could be found out about peoples across the northern frontier: it should be assumed that a good deal was known in the imperial palace about what was happening on the eastern frontier of the empire.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Jacob Neusner argues ('Jews in Iran' in Ehsan Yarshater [ed.] *Cambridge History of Iran* III.2 [Cambridge, 1983], 909–23, at 913–5) that "of those 'opposed' by

long-standing precedent, but in the case of the Christians, acted consistently with normal practice as codified by Ulpian.<sup>53</sup> The aim was to obtain divine favour, or at least counteract any advantage the Persians might be obtaining from their gods as a result of Kartir's programme. Those who have argued that the sacrifices Decius ordered constituted a supplicatio, an act of worship serving to ask the gods for their help in the face of an urgent need, have a good case.<sup>54</sup> The sacrificing-campaign copied Kartir's methods: Kartir mobilized Iranians and conquered peoples to Zoroastrian observance, and Decius aimed to mobilize Romans to enact Roman rituals. His sacrificingcampaign was conceived as a religious solution to the (partly) religious problem of territory being lost to Persia, and Roman cults being persecuted by Zoroastrians in that lost territory. After all, no military solution could be contemplated in the short term. Decius, busy in 249 with a Gothic war.<sup>55</sup> had no opportunity to lead an army east to fight the Persians.

The fact that one quasi-universal act of worship was the point of Decius' edict explains why (although there was widespread anti-Christian action) other high-impact measures against Christians, such as confiscation of church property or a ban on Christian assemblies, were not enacted. The once-for-all nature of the *supplicatio* is also the reason why persecution was not followed by ongoing action to discourage Christianity. If Decius knew how Tansar's and Kartir's reforms reasserted the centrality of the King of kings in Zoroastrian practice (closing fire-temples associated with other kings, re-educating clergy who preached ideas differing from the government view of Zoroastrian propriety), he did not go all the way to impose a Roman parallel: existing local cults were assumed to be satisfactory recipients of sacrifices. But Rives' observation that central government's

Kartir, it seems the Jews suffered least of all." Both sides seem to have thought that their aims could be achieved without (or without much) anti-Jewish action.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Cf. n. 11 above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> See Pohlsander 'Religious Policy of Decius' (as in n. 17), 1838, with references to others who have understood the sacrificing-campaign as a *supplicatio*: E. Liesering, N.H. Baynes, J. Vogt, J. Moreau, J. Molthagen. Rives, while acknowledging a similarity ('Decree of Decius' [as in n. 1], 150–1), does not think the decree mandated a *supplicatio*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Decius' campaigns are summarized by A.R. Birley in 'Decius Reconsidered' (as in n. 40), at 76–8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Observed e.g. by Rives ('Decree of Decius' [as in n. 1]), 142) and Pohlsander ('Religious Policy of Decius' [as in n. 17], 1839).

requirements were imposed in a novel way on the locally-based network of cults in the empire can, I suggest, be explained as arising from the Persian precedent. Shapur sought to strengthen his empire by uniting it behind Zoroastrianism, and persecuting dissidents (including ex-Romans in conquered territory—so Decius decreed universal sacrifice in Greco-Roman cults in order to strengthen the Roman empire. Persian ministers attacked non-Zoroastrian religions, and Zoroastrian clergy who were inadequately supportive of the King of kings—so Decius attacked Christians who would not comply with his order to sacrifice

In Valerian's persecution in 257-8 there were differences in the edict issued and the procedure followed. Sending persons accused of Christianity into exile was an option mentioned in the legislation: Cyprian was sent to Curubis, Dionysius of Alexandria to Cephro.<sup>57</sup> Christians were not allowed to meet, and access to Christian cemeteries was forbidden.<sup>58</sup> On this occasion, bringing Christians in line with Roman religion was the legislators' explicit purpose, as Cyprian was told at his trial.<sup>59</sup> In this respect, Valerian's persecution was more like Kartir's and Tansar's application of their requirement for religious uniformity than Decius' supplicatio had been: like Tansar, who arranged conversations with learned teachers for his imprisoned dissidents. Valerian aimed to secure expressions of conformity, rather than just get sacrifices made.

The decision to persecute was again connected with the politics of the eastern frontier. Valerian's accession to the throne (with his defeat in battle of Aemilius Aemilianus, who had defeated Trebonianus Gallus) came after the Persian capture of Antioch, and the new emperor, by moving his army east in 254, prompted a Persian withdrawal.60 At first, then, he gave a military answer to the Persian question. He was not initially seen by Christians as hostile.<sup>61</sup> Things changed: Eusebius retells a story, which he has got from Dionysius of Alexandria, of the baneful influence on Valerian of Macrianus, "teacher and ruler of the synagogue of the Egyptian magicians" and

Proconsular Acta of St. Cyprian 1; Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 7.11.10.
 Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 7.11.10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Proconsular Acta of St. Cyprian 1; cf. above, n. 6.

<sup>60</sup> In this paragraph I follow Potter's chronology: Prophecy and History (as in n. 18), 47-51.

<sup>61</sup> Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 7.10.2-3.

imperial Minister of Finance, who induced him to persecute. <sup>62</sup> It is possible that Valerian listened to Macrianus' views, since emperors routinely listened to high officials; but subsequent events suggest that renewed trouble on the eastern frontier was the factor which really provoked persecution of Christians. Dura Europos was attacked and fell in 257: by then, as in 249 under Decius, the emperor and his armies were tied down on the north-western frontiers, and the Persians could overrun under-defended eastern areas. Not until 259 could Valerian lead his army east, on the campaign which was to end when he was taken prisoner in battle by Shapur. The anti-Christian persecution of 257–8 filled the gap. It should be read as an attempt to respond to the Persians—who were forcing Romans to become Zoroastrians—with religious countermeasures, until circumstances permitted military action.

A case can be (and has been) made for seeing Decius personally as a man of traditional outlook who might on principle have favoured action against religious deviance;63 but if Dionysius of Alexandria is right about the role of Macrianus in persuading Valerian to persecute. Valerian's background and initial assumptions may have been less conservative. In both cases, however, there is reason to think that the decision by central government to legislate for religious conformity was prompted both by the Persian threat to Roman territory and by knowledge of what the Persians were doing in lands they controlled. After the capture of Valerian in 260 things were different—not because the Persian threat had dissipated, but paradoxically because Roman authority was so much weaker in the east. Odaenathus of Palmyra and Callistus/Ballista were the defenders of Roman territory against Sassanid attacks after 260: and in their time they were neither directed by nor effectively accountable to central government. There is no reason to think they were anti-Christian. Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch in the 260s, simultaneously held appointment as a ducenarius<sup>64</sup>—a unique combination. I am not per-

<sup>62</sup> Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 7.10.4-6.

<sup>63</sup> See for instance Birley 'Decius Reconsidered' (as in n. 40), arguing that Decius may consciously have aimed to emulate republican Decii (78), noting that taking the name of Trajan may have given him ideas of how to deal with Christians (73), and drawing attention to the inscription from Cosa calling him restitutor sacrorum et libertatis (75, and C.I. Babcock 'An Inscription of Decius from Cosa' American Journal of Philology 83 [1962], 147–58).

<sup>64</sup> Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 6,30.8.

suaded by Fergus Millar's argument that Eusebius did not mean to be taken literally when he called Paul a ducenarius, 65 and I think he underestimates the impact on Antioch of the power of Odaenathus, Vaballathus and then Zenobia between 260 and 272.66 To maintain their armies and expand the 'Palmyrene empire' as they did, they must have collected millions in revenue beyond their home area: it is reasonable to suppose that the procurator of Syria Coele (the post the Antioch-based ducenarius held)67 was their man. Meanwhile in 261 Gallienus had issued his toleration rescript,68 turning his back on attempts to fight the Persians with their own religious weapon, and coming to a policy more in line with the development of Roman governmental thinking on Christianity before Decius.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Fergus Millar 'Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian' *JRS* 61 [1971], 1–17 at 12–13).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Millar 'Paul of Samosata' (as in n. 65), 9–10. The Antioch mint, as Millar points out (9), produced coins of Claudius II (268–70)—cf. K. Bittel 'Funde im östlichen Galatien: ein römischer Münzschatz von Devret' *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 6 (1955), 27. Millar, however, seems to allow no middle ground between central government really being in charge, and the Palmyrene rulers being in open rebellion. Yet absence of central government (from the task of defending eastern provinces) created space for the Palmyrenes to expand their spheres of control, at the same time as tackling external threats. It may have suited these rulers to keep the situation ambiguous—for instance, by letting the mints go on making coinage showing the central rulers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Cf. Millar 'Paul of Samosata' (as in n. 65), 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 7.13.